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PASSIONS

The Beatles, all dressed up for a much-hyped album that 30 years ago helped sanctify rock'n'roll as an art form worthy of serious consideration.

ENTERTAINMENT

Critics, art, money and rock

A music writer fires a broadside at those who take rock'n'roll seriously

JUAN RODRIGUEZ
Special to The Gazette

Rock'n'roll has always been kids' stuff, reflecting the simple desires and anxieties of the young. Musically, its relative unsophistication makes life tough for rock critics intent on creating an iconography that elevates their chosen genre to significance.

Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band, which turns 30 this year, hovers like a gargoyle over the field of rock music. Its elaborate collage of a cover and its advance hype – a "concept album" taking the Beatles four months and much money to create by meticulous multi-tracking – made the album sound like high art before the shrink wrap was removed. Above all, Sgt. Pepper prompted intellectuals to join a burgeoning group of young rock critics – a new form – to sanctify rock as worthy of serious consideration. Record companies followed suit, and rock became not only a cash cow, but a sacred cow.

All this seemed terribly important back then. Remember, rock'n'roll news were reserved for teenybopper 16 and Tiger Beat magazines. Academics had missed the boat with Elvis. Eggheads proclaimed Beatlemania "won't last six months." After all, the Fab Four's quasi-barbershop harmonies weren't much to hang your hat on.

With Sgt. Pepper, they transformed British music-hall – which isn't challenging to begin with – into stoned art-song pablum (with the important exception of A Day in the Life). The professors went ape, comparing the Beatles to T.S. Eliot and Schumann. (It was also a nifty way of irritating foreplay with students.)

Richard Goldstein, who had perceptively covered rock in sociocultural terms in the Village Voice, quickly found out the new meaning of the '50s phrase "Don't knock the rock" when his scathing review of Sgt. Pepper for the New York Times received more outraged letters than any other Sunday arts-section article.

"It was the first time I'd heard a boring Beatles album," Goldstein told me in the summer of '67. "And it was very tricky, gimmicky. I listened to it dozens of times, and it was a hard review to write ... but I figured a lot of people would agree with me. It never entered my mind it would cause such a huge stink. Professors wrote in saying the Beatles were Schubert and how dare I put them down.

"It hurt a lot to have people I respected either accuse me of purposely writing a bad review to elevate my own name, or completely miss hidden significances they found in the album. I asked myself, 'How could you hate an album so many people loved?' I was convinced I was finished as a critic."

He was. Years later, he actually apologized for the piece.

The writing was on the wall – that rock was serious stuff – when Crawdaddy was published in 1966 (on an IBM Selectric typewriter), giving voice to the first wave of rock "critics." Rock, wrote editor-publisher Paul Williams, had become "the arbiter of quality, the music of today. The Doors, Brian Wilson, the Stones are modern music, and contemporary 'jazz' and 'classical' composers must try to measure up."

Crawdaddy printed the first version of Richard Meltzer's opus The Aesthetics of Rock, a parody of academic style but also a densely sentient epistemological work. Meltzer became rock criticism's most prolific and irreverent writer, although he's rarely written about the subject in the last 20 years.

"A lot of what happened in the '60s felt very miraculous, like it was coming out of nowhere," he told me recently. "You didn't have 'rock-surround' yet. There was no full mag, but it was certainly in massive discontinuity between what had been encouraged before, in terms of artistic output. It wasn't even like anyone was making art – it was just an emanation of self, like breathing, sweating.

"The obvious cliché is 'Rock'n'roll has a great future behind it.' It did. These false hopes were being created by the fact that for two or three years every Anglo-American band was stripmining entire new continents every time they put out a new album. Eventually, you ran out of turf. How many surprises were left? ... Once upon a time, it was primary music, at the very least a liberating form. It was not about conformism, though many conformed. There was no style-sheet. They were beating their heads against a wall figuring out what would sell. But by '68, it was clear what worked and what didn't. Yes, you might find a treasure-trove of new gimmicks, but mostly since then it's been people being cautious."

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The rock industry – which had neither adequate distribution nor marketing infrastructure when Beatlemania hit – exploded after the Woodstock festival of 1969. When recording honchos saw clearly that half a million young people would sit in mud and rain for three days to bear witness to their rock heroes, they realized they had a captive audience that took the attendant hype to heart.

Young rock critics sprouted like weeds, quickly becoming part of the deal, packed off on goody-laden junkets by Warner Bros. and Columbia. "They were not even old enough to drink," sniffs Meltzer. "There was an intent, for about five minutes, to have a union, so if Creem or some other magazine stepped on you, everyone would boycott. But these kids didn't give a damn. Labour issues boiled down to 'Look, Mom, me in print!' They were no fun at all, careerists at 17, thinking about how to parlay it into a life job."

They eagerly looked for the next big thing. If critics love to write about rock icons, they often have to create them. Bruce Springsteen is the creation of former Crawdaddy and Rolling Stone critic Jon Landau, who uttered the famous line: "I have seen the future of rock'n'roll, and it is Bruce Springsteen." Voila, Landau became Springsteen's producer and manager.

Bruce sounds like a guy who didn't read very much, felt guilty about it and, with Landau's guidance, took matters into his lumpen hands. Painting by numbers, he created cartoonish stick figures roaming about in cars and murmuring sweet nothings, from Born to Run to Born in the U.S.A., wrapped in the stars and stripes forever. The bombastic production of the latter's title tune tapped into the rampant patriotism of 1984's Olympic fervor, instead of the plaintive wail of a Vietnam vet it intended to be.

By the end of his two-year Born in the U.S.A. tour, Springsteen told Rolling Stone years later, he "just kind of felt 'Bruced' out. You end up creating this sort of icon, and, eventually, it oppresses you. ... (The) whole image that had been created – and that I'm sure I promoted – it really always felt like 'Hey, that's not me.' I mean, the whole macho thing, that was never me. ... It's bad enough having other people seeing you that way, but seeing yourself that way is really bad. It's pathetic."

Hmm, would Bruce consider giving consumers a refund for phoniness (like Milli Vanilli)? With his unplugged The Ghost of Tom Joad, he's wrapped up as Steinbeck for the '90s, rocker-in-recovery from stardom.

Rock critics are often blinded by the light (read: hype), the latest hot new act or trends that confirm the usefulness of their profession. Often they write raves worthy of ad copy.

JoAnn Wypijewski, of the leftist Nation, got in her 2 cents worth on Madonna's Erotica: "The songs' infernal rhythms and its lyrics about pleasure/pain remind you of why Tipper Gore got so worked up about rock-'n'roll."

> **"People with these rock-related gigs in their 40s and early 50s should've stopped having anything to do with it a long time ago."**

Only if you're deluded into thinking Madonna's cosmetic philosophies of "pleasure/pain" are the real thing.

"Killjoys like to point out that her songs would be nothing without their accompanying images, but this is nonsense and (ignores) the dialectic of rock ..."

The dialectic of rock is the video, which is a cross between beer and fashion ads – strike a pose. Let us kneel at the erotician of Mammon.

"Knowing' people trashed disco then, as they do Madonna, armoured against any moment when sex might take over where their head should be."

Did she learn this stuff from one of those college courses on Madonna? Or did I hear Madonna spout same, on some talk show, flogging product?

When mega-stars became viewed as anachronisms, the critics put their faith in so-called "alternative rock," complete with its own self-justifying terminology: Grunge, neo-punk, dweeb rock, industrial, death metal, alternative rap, psychedelic rap, dream pop, jangle pop, goth, thrash, thrashcore, funk'n'roll, British dance pop, techno-pop, retro-pop, Japanese retro-pop, acid-jazz, ad nauseam. Critics weaned fans on labels, making them feel intelligent for identifying them, and fostering a belief in the "diversity" of today's product.

Here's Robert Christgau, the middle-age "dean" of rock critics, on PJ Harvey's Dry: "By yoking rock-not-pop late-'60s virtuosity to postpunk neo-primitivism and staking a strong-not-macho female claim on the rockist pose, it's conceptually powerful two ways. ..." Wow, I'll remember not to forget that next time I give her a listen.

Christgau's Record Guide graded 3,000 albums of the 1980s, but not one on Zappa. An appendix listing artists he left out ends: "Frank Zappa: Oh shut up." Uncle Frank, of course, never lived down his infamous paradigm: "Most rock journalism is people who can't write interviewing people who can't talk for people who can't read."

The connection between the rock press and the music biz, Zappa told Musician in 1981, is "a magazine which some insecure record executive has been told is hip by his secretary that he's trying to get to blow him. ... They get up in the morning, look in the mirror, spray their hair, say, 'I'm going to keep my job ... I don't care how many Milli Vanillis I gotta sign. ...' These esteemed gentlemen, based on advice received from hip magazines that tell you what's hot, will then reshape the size and texture of American musical culture in their own pinhead image." The media, he said, celebrates "artistes" who make millions and "it is the millions which make their work quality. Yet anyone can look at what is being done and say 'Jesus, I can do that!' You celebrate mediocrity, you get mediocrity." Audiences, he went on, have been "bred to appreciate the success of the mediocre. People don't wish to be reminded that lurking somewhere there are people who can do some shit you can't do."

Thus, there's a bottomless pit of three-chord "alternative" bands in Urban Outfitter costumes. Turnover is quick. Critics' cravings for discovering new acts is pathological. Green Day today, Rancid tomorrow. Short life spans are even hyped as a reflection of the "creative" ferment of alternative rock. (Whatever happened to the Spin Doctors?) Juvenilia as a sacred cow. Youth as a cash cow.

"People with these rock-related gigs in their 40s and early 50s," Meltzer says, "should've stopped having anything to do with it a long time ago. Because it's poison, it's cancer, it's as bad as television. The massive space that was created by a formerly liberating music is now the force of the status quo. These writers are now honouring in static nature. They should go down with the whole thing."

◆ *Juan Rodriguez is a Montreal writer who was once The Gazette's rock critic.*

SLANG

Parlez with pizzazz

JIM SHEA
Hartford Courant

HARTFORD, Conn. – We all sling slang. It keeps the tongue loose.

With slang, language has flair, spice, humour, sass, personality. Without slang, language is a long talk with Prince Charles.

Could we communicate sans slang? Sure. But would we want to?

Check this out:

You can observe sudden turmoil, or you can watch "it hit the fan."

You can be extremely stylish, or you can be "mackadocious."

You can ask for a cigarette, or you can bum a "lung-duster."

And if you are so inclined:

You can hang, hang out, hang tight, hang loose, hang tough, hang up, let it all hang out or hang one on – in which case, a little hair of the dog may be in order.

"Slang," according to semanticist S.I. Hayakawa, "is the poetry of everyday life."

But because slang is low brow, it was pretty much ignored by the linguistic high micky-doodles until the publication in 1994 of The Random House Historical Dictionary of American Slang (Volume 1).

Written by J.E. Lighter, an English professor at the University of Tennessee, and edited by Jesse Sheidlower, a senior editor at Random House, the dictionary documented virtually every legitimate American slang word from A to G.

Volume 2 (H to O) was released this fall, with the third and final volume due out in 2000.

Lighter started collecting slang as a hobby more than a quarter-century ago. Eventually, he began scrupulously documenting the history of tens of thousands of words.

Although language is his life, Lighter does not speak to the media. That task is left to Sheidlower, who shares Lighter's obsession for slang and is willing to explain how they researched the book.

"You try to read anything that has the likelihood of containing slang," Sheidlower says. "You look in dictionaries, glossaries of slang, countercultural novels, military books ...

"You also watch television, movies, jot down things you've heard on the street. Basically, you try and look in places that will give you slang. A Henry James novel, for example, is not a place you would look."

HISTORICAL APPROACH

What sets Lighter's work apart from the numerous other slang dictionaries published over the years is that it is the first to employ a comprehensive historical approach.

While any slang dictionary can tell you "holy roller" is a disparaging term for a member of a Pentecostal church, Lighter traces the word from its first recorded use in 1841 when it was applied to a religious sect called Shouters who were noted for rolling about on the floor.

Or take the volatile "n-word." Lighter charts its evolution over 300 years in 10 pages of citations, documenting in the process the word's increasing degree of offensiveness.

(This 10-page treatment, by the way, is the most extensive in Volume 2, but falls short of the 13 pages devoted to the "f-word" in Volume 1.)

By following words as they evolve, Lighter is able to provide us with context, as well as insights into our history and culture. This, coupled with the actual slang itself, is what makes the Historical Dictionary of American Slang as entertaining as it is informative.

"Studying language historically not only answers questions such as what words were used in which era," Sheidlower says, "but also addresses deeper social issues such as when black English began to have an impact on the language, or how inducting millions of Americans into the military during the 20th century affected the way we speak."

But just what is slang?

"Our view is that you have Standard English and informal English," Sheidlower says, and slang is a subset of informal English.

"But it is hard to define. Our working definition is that it is non-standard, non-technical English composed chiefly of novel-sounding synonyms for standard expressions. For something to be slang, it has to sound slangy. It has to pack rhetorical punch."

Thus, "neo-maxi-zoom-dweebie" – "an extreme nerd" – qualifies.

But so does a "John Wayne": "Someone who approaches a situation with great force and little deliberation."

What slang is not, however, is jargon, which is the language of a particular group, or dialect, which is regional.

Another characteristic of slang is that it is fluid, with new words being added all the time. (In this regard, we offer the following proposal – a "Costanza": "A parking spot so good you take a cab home rather than give it up.")

"Any dictionary is obsolete as soon as it is published," Sheidlower says. "We are always behind the times. I already have a foot-thick pile of index cards of words we may use in the addendum."

Sheidlower's favourite word from the current volume? "Millibelen," he says. "The amount of female beauty needed to launch one ship."

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